

The Public Archives

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EDITORIAL DEPARTMENT

THE PUBLIC ARCHIVES

All those "manuscripts, documents, records, and materials originating under or passing through the hands of public officers in the regular course and performance of their legal duties," and not in current use, are the Public Archives of the State of Iowa.

It is obvious that in such records are the seeds, roots, and developments of much of our Iowa, its institutions, its agriculture, its farm organizations and the growing web of modern government. Such records, therefore, have a high historic and legal value to the state of Iowa.

Ever since the first session of the territorial assembly in Burlington, Iowa, in 1838, and the first proclamation of Acting Governor William B. Conway, the Territory and State of Iowa have been busy creating "public archives." Once simple in nature and few in number, the product of a government designed to meet the needs of a young commonwealth, the public archives have multiplied in quantity and in kind with each passing year as the complexity of society and of government in a growing state has increased. To the few acts of the early legislatures, the simple record of the governor's journal and the documents left by the modest number of state officials have been added the production of all the new "divisions," "bureaus," "departments," and "commissions" created with the passing decades. So swiftly has the pace of modern government become that the records produced by the combined agencies of government in each of the last ten years is equal to that created in any two, three, and even more years before 1930.

But Iowa has not always preserved her records. Not until 1906 did the state provide by law that the records of Iowa's early institutional beginnings should be regularly

and systematically kept, and that all future records should be likewise cared for. At that time Iowa was recognized as in the forefront of those states having the vision to preserve their official records. Moreover, for many years Iowa was a leader in devising and instituting suitable records for the classification, cataloging and administration of state archives. But since that day the once adequate space provisions have grown sadly deficient, the once adequate and competent staff sorely over-burdened, and the once effective procedures of administration are now grievously insufficient.

To keep abreast of even the storage demands imposed upon it, the department's division of the Public Archives has had to resort to vaults in warehouses outside the building, where the heat, cold, moisture, and the destroying light are uncontrolled. Moreover, with no prospect of a decrease in the flood of records to come in the years ahead, even these expedients will prove insufficient.

For the proper care of the present and future records to come to the custody of the State Department of History and Archives, some four steps will be necessary. The first of these has been taken.

The first, obviously, was to eliminate all superfluous material from the incoming records not truly archives. Since in preparing documents to be sent to the division of public archives, it is easy for a department to indiscriminately dump the contents of any and all drawers, it was necessary to eliminate this excess material at its source, otherwise it might take up unnecessary space and not be weeded out for years to come.

Such a step would not eliminate the pressing need for increased space, however. Space is needed for storage, work rooms, and for the use of the public in searching the archives for historical, legal, or personal purposes. Storage is the most imperious need at present, when tunnels, hallway closets, vaults, sub-basements, and attics are resorted to.

Some persons have at first thought that the erection of a state office building would partly solve the space problem. True, a state office building will enable the respective de-

partments to more carefully prepare their records for transfer, but the better preparation of these documents may actually increase the need for additional space for their housing. Most thoughtful people have concluded that under no circumstances should archives be stored in office buildings, since such documents require special provisions with reference to heat, light, moisture and air controls. A specially designed building, erected with a view to the years ahead, is the only eventual answer to the space and preservation problems.

A third requirement is the result of the kind of records to be presented. Since many of the records are upon paper which deteriorates rapidly, and especially so when frequently handled, a cheap inexpensive system of preservation is essential. The development of the microfilm process for photographing records upon small 35 mm. film this seems to be that method. Since all of Iowa's sister historical institutions, Missouri to the South, Illinois and Wisconsin to the East, and Minnesota on the North have already begun the use of such equipment in the preservation of manuscripts and other records with highly satisfactory results, it behooves Iowa not to overlook this means of preservation.

A fourth need is not less important than the others, and without which they would be valueless: an increased and a trained staff. The need is for skilled workers familiar with the care and custody of public records and manuscripts, for workers trained in the history of government. An untidy and untrained mind is an expensive luxury, not only that, it is an actual danger to the preservation of the public archives. The division needs increased help, but trained help.

The Forty-Ninth General Assembly in session the past winter and spring, took the first step in authorizing the Curator of the Department of History and Archives to draft standards and instructions for the guidance of the various departments of the state government in preparing their records for transfer to the archives division. The general assembly also clarified the state archives law by re-defining what public archives are, and by further regulating the

transfer of records to the Department. This was an important step, but only the first step.

It is hoped that the wisdom and vision which provided for the creation of a division of the public archives in 1906 will also provide the necessary means for a continued efficient and adequate administration of the public archives of the state in the years ahead.

THE PUBLIC'S DIARY

Since a good newspaper is a public diary of the happenings in a given community, like all diaries, it should be well preserved. Of great interest, therefore, to students, scholars, librarians and the public generally of not only Iowa, but of the middle west, is the recent decision of the Des Moines Register and Tribune Company to begin making a complete microfilm record of their morning REGISTER, the evening TRIBUNE, and the SUNDAY REGISTER, commencing with the month of July, 1941.

The microfilm process is a photographic method of reproducing a given record upon a narrow strip of special "movie" film. In the case of newspapers, a strip 35 mm. wide is used. After the positive is made from the original negative, the film may be shown in a "reader" and viewed as the user may require. Such a film will last as long as the best of rag paper, and probably longer, since the film when placed in the "reader" is not touched at all by the hands of those who use it.

All persons or institutions interested in obtaining a copy or print of the film of any of these papers should consult the company.

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